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MAPAM SPLIT RESULTING FROM PRAGUE TRIAL REACTION

Comment and summary: Mordekhai Oren, an Israeli Mapam leader, was arrested at the beginning of January 1952 on charges of having committed criminal acts against the security of Czechoslovakia. Recently, he appeared as a witness at the Prague trial of Communist leaders. This report gives a summary of Oren's testimony, activities of the Israeli Foreign Ministry in Oren's behalf, and Israeli reaction -- especially within the Mapam Party -- to the Prague trial, and traces the split which has arisen within Mapam as a result of the trial.

Mapam's most important and extreme leftist faction, Shomer Hatsa'ir, figured greatly in the split. It is significant that the majority of Shomer Hatsa'ir, the faction which had been responsible for Mapam's usual pro-Cominform line, turned against the party's outspoken Cominform adherents, i.e., the Sneh-Riftin group, and brought about its removal from the Mapam leadership.

Aspects of the Oren affair and the accompanying tension within Mapam have been treated before in

Numbers in parentheses refer to appended sources.⁷

Summary of Oren Testimony

On 28 November, the New York daily newspaper Forward, in reporting the Prague trial, said that Mordekhai Oren, in his testimony, incriminated himself, the defendants, and other Jewish leaders in Europe and Israel and confessed to having been a British spy since 1943 and to have carried out espionage activities in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia from 1945 until his arrest in Prague. According to the paper, Oren had admitted that he had combined Zionist activities with his espionage work "to persuade leading

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personalities to cooperate with the Zionists to obtain maximum aid for strengthening the capitalistic State of Israel, "and that he had only pretended to be a friend of the USSR and of peace. Forward also reported that Oren's testimony had involved Ben-Shalom, First Secretary of the Israeli Embassy in Prague; Ben-Gurion, Israel's Prime Minister, and Moshe Sharett Foreign Minister (1); while Yedioth Hayom, Tel Aviv daily, had already reported on 23 November that Oren had implicated Dr Aryeh Kubovi, Israel's diplomatic representative to Czechoslovakia and Poland /now persona non grata/. (2)

Israeli Government Interest

On 18 September, the Tel Aviv daily paper Haaretz reported that on the previous day, the Israeli Foreign Ministry had received the Czech reply to the second Israeli inquiry /made on 11 June 1952/ about the accusations against Oren and the possibility of providing legal counsel for him. According to the paper, a Foreign Ministry spokesman termed the note unsatisfactory but refused to reveal its contents. (3) The ministry had previously refused to make public, on the grounds that it was private and personal, a letter in German sent by Oren to his wife directly from Pankrac Prison in Prague through Israeli diplomatic channels, according to Haaretz of 24 August. (4) According to the 18 September issue of the Jewish Agency organ Folk un Zion, a bimonthly Jerusalem periodical, Oren admitted in this letter to having committed unspecified crimes against the Czechoslovak People's Republic but nevertheless expressed the hope of seeing his wife again. The paper added that Mrs Oren had turned the letter over to Mapam. (5)

Der Tag, a New York daily newspaper, reported on 20 December that on 18 December, following the conclusion of the Prague trial, Israel submitted a note of protest to the Czechoslovak representative in Tel Aviv, terming as ridiculous the charge that Oren was a British agent and professional spy and rejecting the self-accusations forced out of arrested Israeli citizens /i.e., Oren and Shmuel Orenstein/. According to the paper, the note also criticized Czechoslovakia's lack of respect for international usages in using the two men as witnesses after keeping them in isolation for an entire year. The note, Der Tag went on to say, voiced regret over the hostile acts of the present Czechoslovak government, mentioning in particular the confiscation of funds collected with official approval for reconstruction activities in Israel and the refusal to compensate Israeli citizens for losses incurred during the Nazi occupation of that country. (6)

Israeli Reaction to Prague Trial

Folk un Zion commented on 18 September that the Oren affair placed the Mapam Party in a difficult situation: it did not wish to antagonize the Czech People's Republic but at the same time, wished to support Oren and considered the arrest a "tragic misunderstanding." (5) Previously, on 9 June, the Mapai organ Hador a Tel Aviv daily newspaper, sharply criticized Mapam's silence on the Oren affair, which "continued to disturb public opinion in Israel and the entire world." The paper declared that Mapam's passivity had alarmed Oren's friends in the Kibbutz Artzi federation, who considered this attitude a renunciation of Oren. (7)

In its 18 September article on the Oren affair Folk un Zion quoted another Mapai organ, Hapoel Hatzair, as condemning the methods used in extracting desired confessions from helpless prisoners in Communist states and describing Oren as a victim of such practices. According to Folk un Zion, the Mapai organ denied that Oren would lend himself to sabotage activities and called him a man of character, suggesting that was why it had taken 9 months to persuade him to confess his own guilt. (5)

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On 6 October Haaretz reported on the Kibbutz Artzi conference held in 'Ein Hamifrats on 5 October, at which a resolution was adopted reaffirming the federation's confidence in Oren and in his loyalty to the cause of friendship with the Czechoslovak Republic and expressing the hope that he would soon return to Israel.(8) The 7 October issue of the Jewish Journal, a New York daily newspaper, carried a similar story.(9)

On 24 November, the daily newspaper Jerusalem Post reported that on the previous day, the chief topic of Israeli press news items and editorial columns had been the Prague trial and that the entire Israeli press, with the exception of Communist papers, had supported Oren. The paper focused particular attention on the editorial reaction of the Mapam organ Al Hamishmar, a Tel Aviv daily newspaper, which was described as having confined itself to only one aspect of the case, while other papers, with the exception of Kol Haam, Israeli Communist organ, had treated all aspects and had strongly condemned the trial's anti-Jewish and anti-Israel character. The Jerusalem Post article said that Kol Haam, in observing the Communist line, had carried a headline stating that Oren had admitted he had acted on behalf of Israeli and British intelligence.(10)

The Al Hamishmar editorial on 23 November [referred to above] declared that "Oren acted as a faithful and honest emissary [and] our movement is convinced that he had no intention of committing, nor did he commit, any acts of sabotage against the state or people of Czechoslovakia. We repeat our demand for his release." The editorial declared that if the first radio reports of the trial were correct, it was a serious attempt to smear an innocent man. It went on to say that Mapam, which considers itself an indivisible part of the world revolutionary camp and supports unreservedly the socialist states and the Peoples' Democracies in their struggle against internal and external enemies, could not in any way accept the charges made at the trial against Oren.(11)

On 25 November, Yedioth Hayom reported that on the previous day, Mapam's political committee, meeting in Tel Aviv, had voted to back Oren unconditionally, as well as to endorse the 23 November Al Hamishmar editorial, and that on 22 November, the editorial had also been approved by a three-to-two vote at a session of Mapam's central committee. In connection with the political committee's decision, Yedioth Hayom reported that this decision had been supported by 25 members, including delegates from Kibbutz Artzi and Kibbutz Meuhad [both Mapam kibbutz federations] and from the urban branch of Po'alei Tsiyon Smol, while the nine members who opposed the decision were as follows: Sneh, Berman, Riftin, and Rubin [who had participated with Oren in the Berlin Peace Conference], Feige Ilanit, Eli'ezer Preminger [former Communist Party member], Genia Levin, Avraham Lipsker, and Tubin, all Knesset members. The decision, according to the paper, was considered a defeat for Dr Sneh, who, for the first time in several months, did not have an editorial in the 24 November issue of Al Hamishmar.

During the meeting, reported Yedioth Hayom, Meir Ya'ari and Ya'akov Hazan, leaders of Mapam's Shomer Hatsa'ir faction, together with leaders of the Ahdut 'Avodah faction, emphasized the outspoken anti-Semitic character of the Prague trial. The paper reported that Sneh, in an unsuccessful opposition to Ya'ari and Hazan, warned against the results which an endorsement of the Al Hamishmar line would have for Mapam as long as complete reports on the Prague trial were not available, especially since Oren had gone to Czechoslovakia without having been sent officially by Mapam. According to the paper, the political committee also overrode Sneh's opposition when it voted to send a special emissary to Czechoslovakia to warn Czech circles against putting Oren on trial, since such a trial would have damaging consequences for the Communist peace movement in Israel. Yedioth Hayom said that according to Mapam circles, the emissary would probably be Yisrael Barzilai, former Israeli ambassador to Poland.(12)

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The Jerusalem Post reported on 8 December that the Kibbutz Meuhad council, at the conclusion of a 3-day conference at Shefayim on 7 December, had adopted a resolution which protested the malicious slander of Zionism, the State of Israel, and the Jewish people at the Prague trial. The resolution further stated, according to the paper, that Kibbutz Meuhad, although critical of the present Israeli government, will "rally to the defense of the state against any aggressor." The paper went on to say that the meeting also adopted resolutions which reaffirmed Kibbutz Meuhad's solidarity with the "creators of revolutions in their own lands" and which criticized the Mapai Party for its irresponsible anti-Mapam and anti-Soviet campaign following the Prague trial.(13)

On 8 December, Yedioth Hayom reported another defeat of the Sneh-Riftin group on 7 December at a meeting of the Mapam majority faction held at Givat Haviyah to consider that faction's stand toward the Prague trial. According to the paper, the moderates under Ya'ari and Hazan endorsed the Al Hamishmar line with 109 votes against 50 opposing votes and 40 abstentions. The paper noted that Bentov and Lin /extremist leaders in Mapam/ voted with the moderates of Shomer Hatsa'ir, while Sneh, Riftin, Barzilai, Ilanit, Rubin, and Preminger voted with the opposition.(14) Commenting on the same meeting, the Jerusalem Post on 8 December stated that the moderates in Shomer Hatsa'ir had outvoted the Sneh-Riftin group in an effort to prevent a split in Mapam. The paper noted that the Sneh-Riftin group has accepted the Prague accusations without demur, while the moderates maintain that Oren is innocent, though implying that the other accused are guilty.(13)

The 28 December issue of the Jewish Journal reported that on 25 December, the Mapam council in Tel Aviv had approved a resolution protesting the Prague trial's anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic character and reaffirming Oren's innocence. The paper said "that the resolution reiterated that the charges against Oren were only the results of "tragic coincidences," and reaffirmed the Mapam Council's support of the World Zionist Organization but at the same time, condemned all anti-Communist criticism voiced by other parties. According to the paper, the resolution was supported by a majority of Shomer Hatsa'ir under Ya'ari and Hazan and by the Ahdut 'Avodah and Po'alei Tsiyon /factions in Mapam/, while it was opposed by the extreme left wing of Mapam, led by Sneh, Riftin, and Peri. The actual vote, stated the paper, was 232 for, 49 against, and 18 abstentions; the latter explained that they agreed only with that part of the resolution which referred to Zionism but were opposed to the resolution as a whole because it failed to stress the anti-Titist character of the trial and because the Ben-Gurion government was not held responsible for the changes in the attitude of the People's Democracies toward Israel.(15)

Forward, on 11 January, quoted an article published in Al Hamishmar on 9 January and written by Ya'ari, in which the latter accused Sneh of having deviated from the Mapam Party line and of supporting an anti-Zionist line. Forward, still quoting Ya'ari's article, said that Sneh had demanded elimination from the recent Mapam council resolution of the complete identification of the council with the Zionist movement and that he was trying to prove that the Prague trial was directed against the Jewish bourgeoisie but not against Jews like himself.(16) The following day, Forward published a Tel Aviv report that Sneh had been scheduled to appear as a speaker at a Mapam meeting in Lydda to defend his stand toward the Prague trial but at the last moment, the Mapam council had decided to cancel the meeting.(17)

Political Repercussions

The 11 January issue of Forward reported that a split of Mapam had been expected for some time and that this had now happened. Opponents of the Mapam resolution had been removed from party posts, continued the paper; the Mapam central committee has removed Ya'akov Riftin as the party's political secretary,

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Eli'ezer Peri as editor of Al Hamishmar, and Sneh as secretary of the Israeli-Soviet Friendship League.(16) Quoting a Jerusalem report, the Jewish Journal stated on 7 January that the central committee had also decided to remove all Mapam branch secretaries who subscribed to the Sneh-Riftin line.

The paper further stated that an official split in Mapam was expected to occur within 10 days, by which time Sneh and Riftin were to have established their own faction in Mapam. According to the paper, Sneh has declared that his new political group would fight for its place in the labor movement and would not hesitate to leave Mapam while retaining its seats in the Knesset. However, the paper went on to say, P-zan has told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that the present Mapam leadership is strong enough to purge the party of elements hostile to Zionist-Socialists ideals.(18)

Four days later, Forward reported that the Kibbutz Artzi federation had expelled the Yad Hanah kibbutz, which was charged with having affiliated itself with the Israeli Communist Party and that those of its members who were opposed to the anti-Semitic character of the Prague trial had left the kibbutz. The paper went on to say that the Mapam council would meet soon in Haifa to consider the situation which caused the split in the party.(16)

Earlier, on 8 January, the same newspaper had reported that Bar-Yehudah's recent action in the Knesset was considered by political circles as an official declaration of the split. The details of the affair, as reported by Forward, are as follows: Hanan Rubin was slated to become deputy chairman of the Knesset, but his election was postponed on the advice of Meir Argov, Mapai leader, who termed Rubin unsuited for that post and called on Mapam to nominate another candidate. Mapam refused to do this, and in the voting Bar-Yehudah abstained, thereby serving notice that the Mapam Knesset delegation was not united.(19)

SOURCES

1. New York, Forward, 28 Nov 52
2. Tel Aviv, Yedioth Hayom, 23 Nov 52
3. Tel Aviv, Haaretz, 18 Sep 52
4. Ibid, 24 Aug 52
5. Jerusalem, Folk un Zion, 18 Sep 52
6. New York, Der Tag, 20 Dec 52
7. Tel Aviv, Hador, 9 Jun 52
8. Haaretz, 6 Oct 52
9. New York, Jewish Journal, 7 Oct 52
10. Jerusalem, Jerusalem Post, 24 Nov 52
11. Tel Aviv, Al Hamishmar, 23 Nov 52
12. Yedioth Hayom, 25 Nov 52
13. Jerusalem Post, 8 Dec 52
14. Yedioth Hayom, 8 Dec 52
15. Jewish Journal, 28 Dec 52
16. Forward, 11 Jan 53
17. Ibid, 12 Jan 53
18. Jewish Journal, 7 Jan 53
19. Forward, 8 Jan 53

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